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The meaning of a Cristo Rey high school graduation

by Casey McCorry



Graduate Eddie Sanchez reads a prayer with Cristo Rey High School's president, Charity Sr. Vickie Perkins, and Fr. John Foley, founder of the Cristo Rey Network. (Bernie Concannon)

KANSAS CITY, MO. -- With proud parents looking on, their cameras clicking, 60 once unlikely high school graduates eagerly grabbed their diplomas at a ceremony here June 4. As they did, they gave strong affirmation to a novel and still relatively new model of Catholic education.

Cristo Rey, located in the heart of this city, is a Jesuit-inspired, Catholic-operated and community-backed high school and this month it graduated its first senior class.

"Look forward to the future that is yet to be," the goal-oriented Charity Sr. Vickie Perkins told a beaming graduating class. It would be the last time the students would hear her well-worn encouragement before heading on to college.

For four years the students of Cristo Rey listened to Perkins as she talked about their futures, careers they were carving out day by day by staying faithful to goals they had set for themselves with her encouragement.

This graduation event was special for several reasons:

- It was memorable for teary-eyed parents who had never had the opportunities their children now have.
- It was a triumph for the Sisters of Charity who opened the high school, converting an old Redemptorist High School building, and had devoted countless hours to the students, teaching them, along with their course work, self-esteem and a belief to follow their grandest dreams.
- It provided assurance for student sponsors, some of whom had opened their wallets and others who had opened their companies to assist the students.
- Finally, it gave further support to Jesuits and associates who for the past 15 years have been building the Cristo Rey model of education.

Cristo Rey High School is one of 24 throughout the United States developed by Jesuit Fr. John Foley since 1995 when he opened a school in Chicago. What started then as a temporary remedy for the pricier private-school Jesuit model of secondary education, in place for decades, has now emerged as a new model of offering education and Catholic values to less privileged students.

The Cristo Rey model enrolls students who otherwise would not be able to afford private education. It provides classes four days weekly. On the fifth day the students work in local private companies or not-for-profit organizations. By working in the community the students gain skills, acquiring experience in a corporate work setting.

"I am sure you are aware that the world doesn't work like it is meant to," Foley told the graduating class. "I hope here you have found a future, a future like God meant it to be, a future of hope."

In 2006, Cristo Rey's first year of operation, buses labeled "Cristo Rey Kansas City, the school that works!" unloaded students into a still very new environment full of strict dress codes, rigorous academic requirements, and the promise of college acceptance, if rules were followed, four years down the line. For the school to thrive it needed continuous community support and sustained donations.

The school is assisted by grants and other donations from community members. However, it has avoided some of the traditional fundraising methods often associated with private schools. Instead Cristo Rey decided to rouse the Kansas City community with a "Dancing with the Stars" fundraiser. Allowing for donors to do more than merely write a check, it brought students and community members together. Local celebrities were trained by professional dancers and judged by the audience. A risky venture blossomed into an overwhelming success with over 900 in attendance, raising some \$400,000 in donations in the past year alone.

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As Foley reminded the graduating students, "May you become the risky generation. Unless you are willing to take a risk you are tying the Holy Spirit's hands."

Cristo Rey's pioneering class of 2010 was only a fraction of a larger population of graduating students in the Cristo Rey Network -- Kansas City's Cristo Rey high school is just one of 24 urban schools across the country facing the same obstacles and seeking to send hard-working students to college.

After the success of Foley's first school in Chicago, the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation decided to support a replication of his model. With a \$9.9 million gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2003, the Chicago experiment became the model for the other 23 schools.

As the network grew so too did the companies that stepped forward to assist the plan. Currently some 1,500 companies in the nation are active in the corporate work-study program. The success of the program can be measured by a remarkable 98 percent graduation rate. The Kansas City Cristo Rey boasts a full 100 percent graduation rate.

Summing up his talk at the graduation ceremony, Foley sent off the new graduates with the words: "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

[Casey McCorry is an *NCR* intern.]

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